

The Case for Slow Reading

Teachers can enhance students' pleasure and success in reading by showing them how to slow down and savor what they read.

Thomas Newkirk

"Speed her up, 401!"

—The president of Electro Steel in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*

Open any newspaper and you are likely to find a story of some school whose students have read a million, two million—some big number of pages. As a payoff, the teachers wear pajamas for a day, or the principal shaves his head or agrees to eat worms, a reward to the delighted students. Then Pizza Hut or some other franchise that sponsored the event hands out coupons for nonnutritious food to the voracious readers.

It's all great fun, a good story, a terrific photo op. But something bothers me about this picture—it's as though reading has become a form of fast food to consume as quickly as possible, just one more cultural celebration of speed.

This association of good reading with speed permeates our schools, from the hugely popular Accelerated Reading Program, to "nonsense word fluency" tests in which young children have to decode "words" at a rate of more than one per second, to standardized tests in which reading is always "on the clock." To be quick is to be smart; to be slow is to be stupid.

The High-Speed Reading Blur

As a confessed slow reader, I would like to make a case for slowness. By slowness, I don't mean the painful, laborious decoding some students must do or the plodding march through some assigned novels that may take weeks. Any pleasure or success in reading requires fluency and the ability to read with some pace.

But there is real pleasure in downshifting, in slowing down. We can gain some pleasures and meanings no other way. I think of the high-speed trains in Europe that I always wanted to ride, ones that hurtle



through the French landscape at more than 200 miles per hour—that is, until I learned that at these high speeds, even the distant scenery becomes a blur. The retina simply can't take in a clear picture at that rate of movement.

The same thing can happen in reading. I'd like to explore what we miss when we define *good* reading as *fast* reading and to argue for what Ellin Keene has called “dwelling” in the texts we read.

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Author and media theorist Neil Postman provides a foundation for this argument in his classic book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979). Schools, Postman argues, should act on a thermostatic principle; a thermostat acts to cool when a room is too hot and heat when a room is too cool. According to Postman, schools should act to check—and not to imitate—some tendencies in the wider information environment. “The major role of education in the years immediately ahead,” he writes, “is to help conserve that which is necessary to a humane survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture” (p. 25).

Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse. Postman frames this imperative as a moral one. But, like the slow food movement, we can make a case on the basis of pleasure. The term *taste* applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down.

Silencing Reading

First, some background on how we got here. The greatest debate on reading instruction occurred early in the 20th century. The “reader” of McGuffey's famous textbooks was an *oral* reader. Comprehension was part of the picture, but to be an ideal reader, the student had to be able to perform orally. If a teacher addressed the reading rate at all, it was to caution the student about reading too fast. But this approach

became increasingly viewed as antiquated, inefficient, and mismatched to the ways people read outside school.

In a classic study of the psychology of reading, Edmund Huey (1921) claimed that oral reading had a ceiling of about four words per second, whereas silent readers could process texts at two or three times that rate—with no diminishment of comprehension. It was time, he argued, for reading to go silent. Lip readers and subvocalizers (like me) were viewed as too stubbornly tied to the sound of words, too limited by the inefficient mechanisms of breath and speech. Huey did claim that silent readers retained a form of inner speech with traces of sound awareness, but at the higher and more efficient speed of reading, readers only sampled sounds—the train was moving too fast.

So reading went silent.

This is the world of reading that we have inherited—one suited to the faster pace of 21st-century life, one better matched to the new abundance of books and magazines. (Who wants to rush through reading if only a few



books are available?) Yet our attraction to sounds, to the rhythms of speech, and to a human voice in the text is primal. We attend readings, listen to books on tape, or feel the presence of a narrator in fiction—all of which return us to the “inefficient” rate of regular speech. Authors like Richard Ford painstakingly read their nearly finished novels aloud; writers continually attest to the importance of finding the right “voice” for their work. Some of us begin our classes by reading a poem aloud, and we ask our students to read their work aloud in workshops. In church, we may listen to and meditate on a single verse from the Bible, one we have heard many times before. And we are alienated by authorless, bureaucratic



letters—like the ones I get from the IRS informing me of my annual arithmetic mistakes.

Slowing Down

So I would like to propose some strategies for slowing down and reclaiming the acoustical properties of written language—for savoring it, for enjoying the infinite ways a sentence can unfold—and for returning to passages that sustain and inspire us. Many of these strategies are literally as old as the hills.

Memorizing

Memorization is often called “knowing by heart,” and for good reason. Memorizing enables us to possess a text in a special way. My father tells the story of

waiting with my uncle outside a probate office in Covington, Kentucky, after the death of their mother. No one seemed in any hurry to assist them, and Uncle Charles, never known as a great student, sighed, “The law’s delay, the insolence of office.” At that moment, he called to mind a phrase from one of Hamlet’s soliloquies that he had memorized 50 years earlier. We all should own some texts in that way.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is a regular activity in elementary classrooms, but it dies too soon. Well-chosen and well-read texts are one of the best advertisements for literacy. By reading aloud, teachers can create a bridge to texts that students might read; they can help reluctant readers imagine a human voice animating the words

on the page. Besides, some passages seem to beg to be read aloud.

One of my favorites comes from Harry Crews’s essay, “The Car,” where he describes the love of his young life:

After the Buick, I owned a 1953 Mercury with three-inch lowering blocks, fender skirts, twin aerials, and custom upholstery made of rolled Naugahyde. Staring into the bathroom mirror for long periods of time, I practiced expressions to drive it with. It was that kind of car. (1998, p. 367)

When I read this aloud, I just love the sound of “rolled Naugahyde.”

Attending to Beginnings

Writers often struggle with their beginnings because they are making so many commitments; they are establishing a

voice, narrator, and point of view that are right for what will follow. These openings often suggest a conflict. They raise a question, pose a problem, create an “itch to be scratched.”

Readers need to be just as deliberate and not rush through these carefully constructed beginnings. As teachers, we can model this slowness. Take the

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memoir of the well-known children’s writer Jack Gantos. In his opening paragraph of *Hole in My Life* (2002), he refers to the book’s cover, with its repetition of a mug shot of a bearded, mustachioed young man with an ID number stamped across the photo:

The prisoner in the photograph is me. The ID number is mine. The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was twenty-one years old and had been locked up for a year already—the bleakest year of my life—and I had more time ahead of me. (p. 3)

Clearly, he had committed a serious crime to be locked up in a medium-security prison for more than a year at such a young age. How could a 20-year-old dig such a deep hole for himself? What kind of crime put him there? How did he survive this “bleakest” year of his life? What connection does this experience have to his later success as a chil-

dren's writer? There is also a slowness to this opening, as though he is making his admission, piece by piece. Gantos has given us a road map for the rest of the book—if we pay attention.

Rethinking Time Limits on Reading Tests

We currently give students with disabilities additional time to complete standardized tests; we should extend

testing situation can be humiliating, and they quickly learn that they are set up for failure. They often just fill in (or make designs with) the bubbles on the test. But in the real world, we frequently compensate for our lack of speedy comprehension by persevering and spending more time on a task. These patient, slower workers are often extraordinarily valuable. In the folktale, the turtle always wins.

ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood” (p. 11). We can hear the way McCourt repeats the words *worse*, *miserable*, and *Irish*, creating an ascending scale of misery. It's a great sentence that deserves attention.

A variation of this activity is a quote-and-comment assignment in which students copy out passages by hand that

they find particularly meaningful and then comment on why they chose those passages. Copying a passage slows us down and creates an intimacy with the writer's style—a feel for word choice and for how sentences are formed. At the end of a unit in which my students have done a great deal of reading, we celebrate by selecting passages we want to hold on to and reading them aloud to the class. It always interests me to see which passages the students select.

Reading Poetry

Even in this age of efficiency and consumption, it is unlikely that anyone will reward students for reading a million poems. Poems can't

be checked off that way. They demand a slower pace and usually several readings—and they are usually at their best when read aloud.

My colleague Tom Romano begins every one of his classes by reading a poem aloud. He invites his students to comment on images or lines that strike them, although without engaging in the overanalysis that killed poetry for many of us. More than any other genre, poetry calls on us to see the world differently, to break out of conventional perception: Images can “arrest” us—they can, as



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this opportunity to all students. Tests place too high a premium on speed, and limits are often set for administrative convenience rather than because of a reasoned belief in what makes good readers.

Even as a strong reader, I felt pressed in the reading passages section of standardized tests to exceed my normal reading rate. I would resort to survival strategies I never used voluntarily—skimming, sampling, and beginning with the questions.

For reluctant or slow readers, the

Annotating a Page

In this activity, students probe the craft of a favorite writer. They pick a page they really like, photocopy it, and tape the photocopy to a larger piece of paper so they have wide margins in which they can make notations. Their job is to give the page a close reading and mark word choices, sentence patterns, images, dialogue—anything they find effective

For example, this sentence appears on the opening page of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996): “Worse than the

Webster's online dictionary says, "cause [us] to stop."

Take the ending of Emily Dickinson's famous poem, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," where she describes the moment of panic when she sees a snake:

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

We might comfortably have expected "Numbness at the Bone." But *zero* arrests us and forces us to feel something new, the momentary weakness or helplessness we may experience when seeing a snake. We can't help but pause.

Savoring Passages

Children know something that adults often forget—the deep pleasure of repetition, of rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them ("And Max said, 'BE STILL!' and tamed them with the magic trick..." [Sendak, 1963]). There are passages that continue to move me, like the ending to James Joyce's short story "The Dead" (1916/1967), which I read each winter. The main character, Gabriel, confronts his own emotional failings:

Yes, the newspapers were right, snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. (p. 651)

I am always touched by the dark beauty of this ending, by the deep sadness of Gabriel as he contemplates the snow, the early death of his wife's first love, and the remains of his life.

We never really "comprehend" these anchoring passages—we're never done with them; we never consume them. Like sacred texts, they are inexhaustible, continuing to move us, support us, and even surprise us (until

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I wrote out the passage, I had missed the word *mutinous*).

This is, after all, the way people have read for centuries—and it is a way that my father read near the end of his life. He was never a religious man in the churchgoing sense, but in his last years he returned every day to Psalm 46 in the King James Bible, which begins:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

It was the passage my brother read and reread to him as he lay dying, as his earth was being "removed." By this time, his Bible was so worn that it had to be held together by rubber bands. As the minister said at his memorial service, "Here is a book that has seen some use."

Not all our reading, nor all our students' reading, can or should have this depth. We read for various purposes. But some of our reading should have such depth, inefficient as that might be. **EL**

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